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From revision to transformation: Reflections on the impact of the review process across the qualitative/quantitative divide

Carla Willig

Be careful what you wish for...

These words come to mind when I reflect on my experience of publishing a paper in a mainstream psychology journal with a high impact factor. Since this is exactly the type of journal that qualitative psychologists are encouraged to publish in if they want to be considered 'research-active' by their institutions in the current climate (see for example Ponterotto, 2019), I thought it might be helpful to share my experience with readers of this Bulletin. In particular, I want to draw attention to the way in which the review process can transform the original version of a paper to such an extent that its author is left with mixed feelings about its publication. This is what happened to me when, after four rounds of revisions, the final version of my paper "What can qualitative research contribute to psychological knowledge?" appeared in *Psychological Methods* last year (Willig, 2019).

The starting point: Inspiration and motivation

The initial idea and motivation for writing my paper was generated by reading Svend Brinkmann's brilliant "Humanism after posthumanism: Or qualitative psychology after the 'posts'", published in *Qualitative Research in Psychology* in 2017. In this paper, Brinkmann draws attention to the recent emergence of a post-qualitative critique of conventional qualitative research which argues that qualitative research ought to abandon its attempt to contribute to the production of knowledge about the human condition. Brinkmann offers a sophisticated and constructive critique of the post-qualitative perspective in which he argues that it is possible to accept its "ontology of flux" (that is, the argument that as humans we are entangled with matter and nature and that human subjectivity does not stand outside of and separate from non-human practices) whilst "holding on to a form of humanism and corresponding qualitative research practices" (p.122). I found myself in agreement with Brinkmann's argument and wanted to reflect further on the implications of the emergence of a post-qualitative perspective for the future of qualitative psychology. I decided to write a paper which reviews the status of qualitative research in the light of these developments and which identifies criteria which will allow us to differentiate between qualitative research and other pursuits that are concerned with exploring human experience and its diverse meanings. In what is increasingly being referred to as a "post-truth" era (Ball, 2017; d'Ancona, 2017; Davis, 2017) it seemed to me to be particularly important to protect the notion of "psychological research" in general (and qualitative psychology in particular) from becoming indistinguishable from other forms of meaning-making, for example as they are practiced in other disciplines such as journalism, philosophy or the arts and which have significance and value in their own right.

Practical considerations: the next REF and all that...

Once inspiration had struck and I had developed a general idea of what I wanted to write about, I started to wonder which journal to submit my paper to. The obvious place would have been the same journal that Brinkmann's paper had been published in: *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. However, I was aware that in order to achieve a high rating in our departmental Annual Research Quality Monitoring (ARQM) exercise and in the next Research Excellence Framework (REF), it would serve me well to gain a publication in a journal with a higher impact factor. I decided to be bold and go for *Psychological Methods*, an American Psychological Association (APA) journal with an Impact Factor of 6.485 (5-year impact factor: 10.315). In theory, targeting this journal made sense as on its website it describes itself as "devoted to the development and dissemination of methods for collecting, analysing, understanding, and interpreting psychological data. Its purpose is the dissemination of innovations in research design, measurement, methodology, and quantitative and qualitative analysis to the psychological community". I was hoping to be able to kill two birds with

one stone by developing my argument about how to respond to the post-qualitative critique *and* gaining a highly-rated (for REF purposes) publication at the same time.

The manuscript's journey through the review process

I submitted the first version of my paper on 20th February 2018 and received three reviewers' comments on 19th July 2018. The editorial office apologised for the long wait and explained that the reason for this was that *Psychological Methods* was struggling to find suitable reviewers for my paper as it dealt with issues not commonly addressed by contributors to the journal. The reviewers' comments, when they finally arrived, were detailed and thorough, raising queries and issues which, whilst challenging, did feel helpful and constructive. I submitted a revised version of the paper on 15th August 2018. This was followed by a further round of reviewers' queries (received on 18th October) which I addressed in further revisions to the paper. I submitted what I believed to be the final version of my paper on 30th November 2018. However, I received a letter from the editor with a further request for revisions on 7th January 2019. The purpose of these revisions was to make the paper more accessible and relevant to the readership of *Psychological Methods*. Whilst this may sound like a fairly minor issue, it actually meant that the focus of the paper changed significantly as the removal of all references to the post-qualitative critique was made a condition for publication. In addition, I was asked to adjust my use of terminology by removing terms which may not be familiar to the readers of the journal. This led to the substitution of words like "to theorise" with "to develop explanatory interpretations", and the substitution of the phrase "social and psychological" with "psychological", amongst other changes of this type.

Version 4 of the paper was submitted on 5th February 2019 and accepted on 28th February 2019.

From revision to transformation

The paper which was finally published in *Psychological Methods* online on 22nd April 2019 differs significantly from the original version I submitted in February 2018. The change in focus, style and content is reflected in the change of the title and the wording of the abstract, as demonstrated below:

Version 1

Title: Qualitative Research in a 'Post-Truth' Era: What can qualitative psychology contribute to psychological knowledge?

This paper is concerned with the question of what makes qualitative research 'research', and with how we decide whether something is qualitative research as opposed to another kind of meaning-making activity. The paper notes the emergence of a 'post-qualitative research' perspective which takes issue with the very notion of making knowledge claims on the basis of research. In response to this challenge, this paper addresses the question of how qualitative research can be differentiated from other meaning-making pursuits that are concerned with human experience and its meaning and significance. To develop its argument, the paper starts by defining and characterising qualitative psychology, its scope and remit. The paper goes on to examine qualitative psychology's relationship with the pursuit of knowledge and to position it within the wider field of psychological inquiry. It identifies the boundaries that contain (and, therefore, define) 'qualitative research' and that differentiate it both from other types of research and from other types of meaning-making pursuits. The paper identifies ways in which qualitative research contributes to psychological knowledge (including thick description, critique, theory development), and concludes by affirming its place in a psychological research community which seeks to improve our understanding of ourselves and the world we live in.

Version 4:

Title: What can qualitative research contribute to psychological knowledge?

This paper reflects on what qualitative research in psychology can contribute to the accumulation of psychological knowledge. It provides an overview of qualitative research in psychology and discusses its potential value to quantitative researchers. It reviews the differences and similarities between qualitative and quantitative research and explains how qualitative research can be differentiated from other forms of knowing that are concerned with human experience. This paper explains what makes qualitative research “research”, and how to determine if something is qualitative research or another kind of meaning-making activity. The paper starts by defining and characterising qualitative psychology and by identifying qualitative psychology’s aims and objectives. The paper goes on to examine qualitative psychology’s relationship with the pursuit of knowledge and to position it within the wider field of psychological inquiry. The paper identifies ways in which qualitative research contributes to psychological knowledge (including *thick description*, *critique*, *theory development*) and concludes by affirming its place in a psychological research community that seeks to improve our understanding of ourselves and the world we live in.

We can see that what had started off as a critical engagement with a recent epistemological challenge to the qualitative research endeavour (in the form of the post-qualitative critique) had become a general introduction to qualitative research for quantitative psychologists. How had this happened? Essentially, it was the editor’s concern with the readership of the journal and their expectations that led to the transformation of the paper. And since it can reasonably be assumed that the readers of *Psychological Methods* do approach the papers they read in their journal from a research perspective that is based upon a realist orientation to knowledge generation, it is not surprising that the editor was keen to ensure that my paper was compatible with the journal’s readership’s deep-seated assumptions about what psychological research is all about. In his letter of 7th January 2019, the editor explains that the inclusion of a discussion of the post-qualitative critique in my paper would be a distraction for readers and potentially serve to discredit qualitative research in the eyes of quantitative researchers, and should therefore be removed from the paper. He writes:

“The biggest issue is that, after reading the section on post-qualitative criticisms in both the original document and this revision, I feel that it is more distracting than helpful and would like to see it removed from the paper. The basis for this criticism, the idea that the presence of subjectivity in data collection makes inferences based on data no better than personal opinions, would be seen as reasonable by very few quantitative researchers, and would weaken the perception of qualitative researchers in general and possibly your paper in particular (for even entertaining this criticism).”

The editor went on to explain that “Quantitative methodology would necessarily reject the post-qualitative critique out of hand - it is fundamentally inconsistent with the research process. Given that the purpose of this article is to provide an opening to qualitative research to quantitative methodologists, I think that this discussion is too far off the point to be worth including. Dropping it also doesn't affect the ability of readers to understand the remainder of your paper.”

In other words, from a quantitative researcher’s point of view, the arguments raised by the post-qualitative critique are so far removed from their understanding of what research is all about, that to take such arguments seriously enough to discuss them in a paper would discredit the paper itself - even if the paper’s author takes issue with and argues against them!

No such thing as a free lunch

Reflecting on the review process in general, and engaging with the editor’s comments in particular, made me realise that I should have known that my paper in its original version would not be accessible to the readership of *Psychological Methods*. I should have realised that the price I would have to pay for gaining a publication in this journal would be to refocus my paper by taking into account who I was writing for. As a qualitative psychologist it is easy to forget that what Madill et al.

(2000) describe as a discovery mode of investigation (whereby the researcher gathers information in order to better understand what is going on in a particular situation) is the taken-for-granted and only mode of investigation for most quantitative researchers. To dedicate an entire paper to developing an argument that asserts that qualitative research, despite its diverse epistemological orientations, is still committed to the pursuit of knowledge as its overarching objective, and that all types of knowledge generated by qualitative research (even 'relativist' knowledge) make claims about how something happens or what something is (be that people's thoughts and feelings, their action and practices, the way they make sense of the world, the discursive resources they deploy and how they deploy them, and so on), as I have argued in this paper and elsewhere (see for example Willig, 2016), must seem like stating the obvious to the readers of *Psychological Methods*.

You live and learn...

To conclude, on reflection perhaps it would have been wiser to write two papers - one in response to Brinkmann's paper for *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, and another one to raise the profile of qualitative psychology aimed at readers of *Psychological Methods*. This probably would have required the same amount of work as transforming version 1 of my paper into version 4, and it would have allowed me to achieve both of my goals (first, to develop my argument about how to respond to the post-qualitative critique and second, to gain a high-impact-factor publication), although admittedly not in one move.

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